

ONE WAY OR ANOTHER

BY CHRISTIAN ZAZZALI

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BUILD A PROJECT A HUNDRED TIMES IN MY head before we start work on it. I put formal plans into writing, but I also try to work through every scenario I can think of in advance to have everything lined up like dominoes, with all the details in place.

But things still go wrong—like the time we had twelve weeks to demolish one floor of a building, then build it back. After reviewing the client's drawings, I told them that the twelve-week schedule wasn't going to work the way they had things sketched out.

"You have us finishing the frames after the drywall's in," I pointed out to them. "But the door frames are clear oak, and there's not enough time." I outlined the man-hours and the timing required to do the job the way they had stipulated, and explained why it couldn't be completed on schedule. Then I offered an alternative solution.

Instead of waiting to build the frames on site, I suggested having them built in advance at a Canadian millwork factory. We could have them shipped down the

week before the job was finished, and then install them. Great idea, everyone agreed. It would require a little more money for shipping, but that was acceptable.

With a week to go, I believed that the job was going well—until I got a phone call from the superintendent.

"The doors are here, the frames are here, all 25 of them, and they look great," he told me. But then he added the line made famous in the Apollo 13 movie: "Houston, we've got a problem."

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"The frames don't fit in the freight elevator."

"Then carry them up," I told him. "You know, get some guys and haul them up the stairs."


"We've already tried that. They won't make the first turn because of the jog and the—"

"I'll be right there," I told him.

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It's about the time you start thinking, "Maybe I should just keep driving."

How was I going to get these oversized frames up to the 12th story of a building and installed in a week for one of our best clients? This was a client worth millions to my company. I couldn't ask them for more time; they had already scheduled the movers and the utility installations. Everything had to happen that weekend. I still needed to file inspections before the client could move in, and I couldn't schedule the inspections until we had the doors on and working properly.

As I was driving to the site, I started thinking of new approaches to the problem. The superintendent had told me that the frames couldn't make the first turn. But could they make the second? I called back and asked.

"What difference does it make if they fit through the second turn?" he asked me. "We can't get them past the first turn." But I was already thinking: Let's figure out a way to get rid of the first turn.

In the meanwhile, I arrived at the site. As I parked, I looked at what was next to me: another one of my company's projects. We were constructing a building right next door, and we had a tower crane sitting on the site. So I asked the superintendent, "How about if we carry the frames down to the 12th floor from the roof?" And he answered, "We didn't think about that. But the frames aren't on the roof; we have them on the loading dock."

I went over and spoke to the superintendent on the other job. In a matter of minutes we had the frames lifted to the roof with the crane. Then all we had to do was to carry them down two flights, instead of up twelve.

It all worked out, and our customer never knew there was a problem. As far as the client was concerned, the job was completed on schedule and the doors looked great. But we knew that disaster had been narrowly averted. Back when we were planning the job, all I had needed to say was, "How are we going to deliver these pre-built frames to their locations? Let's check the freight elevator." Just one more detail, and we would have had everything running smoothly.

I've learned that whenever I come up with a unique solution to a problem, I need to be prepared to consider the implications of applying that solution. What elements of my plan are affected by the solution? What elements of the project need to be adjusted based on these changes?

But if it were only that simple...the truth is that while we can avoid some problems by asking the right questions, there still will be problems to be solved and

lessons to be learned on every project. Recognizing this helps me to be mentally prepared to meet the challenges in front of me, armed with two essential tools: experience and flexibility.

I try to remember what I learn on projects and carry those lessons forward. Now, for example, I give every contractor on every job the dimension of the freight elevator with the pricing proposal. With that, I no longer own the problem. It's the contractor's responsibility to build something we can fit in the elevator.

Just as importantly, when problems do pop up, I try to stay open-minded about potential solutions, and put creative thinking to use. I try to remember that what doesn't go up, might just come down. •

LESSONS

- Even experienced project managers can't anticipate every potential problem. Part of planning ahead should include allowing oneself the flexibility to rethink the plan and improvise if necessary.
- Unique solutions to problems sometimes create a set of new problems unique in nature as well. In dealing with sudden changes in planning, try to consider what other elements of the project will be affected, but don't second guess yourself into a state of inaction because you can't anticipate every contingency.

QUESTION

How do you create a culture that fosters both detailed planning and flexibility?



On almost every day of the year, HITT Corporate Interiors begins work on about twenty commercial construction projects and completes another twenty.

As a senior project manager for HITT, **CHRISTIAN ZAZZALI** has multiple project managers reporting to him at any given time. His job: to keep all the plates spinning.

Zazzali has been with HITT since 1999. He has received the Associated Builders & Contractors' Excellence in Construction Award. Zazzali's story "Thanksgiving Hocus Pocus" appeared in ASK 10. He can be reached at czazzali@hitt-gc.com.